Reviewed by Susana Torre

The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice

Francesca Hughes, editor
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EVER SINCE THE FEMINIST challenge to traditional architectural practice in the late 1970s, the issue of women in the profession has been revisited from time to time by writers who usually profess themselves disappointed at the slow pace of change in the profession. The anthology *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice* is one of the latest revisits, and as such it reveals some of the problems in this ongoing debate.

In her introduction, editor Francesca Hughes laments the "absence of women from the profession of architecture," which she finds "very difficult to explain and very slow to change." To Hughes this suggests "a profound gender-related crisis at the base of architecture." From such a premise, this anthology proceeds as though discovering a new dilemma — and thus ignoring twenty years of critical studies (in the U.S. and elsewhere) on the historical and ideological circumscription of women's practices in architecture, and ignoring also the real changes — major and minor — that have occurred. There is indeed still a "gender-related crisis" in the profession, but its nature has changed in ways that too few of these essays recognize. The struggle is no longer simply about the "absence" of women, but about their marginalization and subordination.

Architecture accounted for a large number of the women who surged into graduate and professional education in the 1980s. The percentage of women graduating from Ivy League master of architecture programs increased far more than the percentage graduating from bachelor of architecture programs or from state universities. In previous decades, such women would typically have completed college mainly to achieve a suitable marriage; now they are encouraged to become professionals in their own right. This current generation is represented by designers and scholars such as Victoria Casasco, Liseanne Couture, Miriam Gusevich, Liquid Ink, Brigitte Shim, Marion Weiss, and Sharon Haar. To a greater extent than women professionals of decades past, their reputations are emerging with little reference to either the approval or opposition of male patrons. The past few years have also seen the publication of (a few) monographs on women architects (including the historical figures Eileen Gray, Lilly Reich, and Julia Morgan, and contemporary firms such as Asymptote, Rebecca Binder, Hariri and Hariri, Eva Jiricna, and Patkau Architects, among others). Some of the latter work professionally with their husbands, but more as partners than muses. Further signs of change include the ACSA's conferral of the Topaz Award — a lifetime award recognizing influential teachers of architecture — on Denise Scott Brown, and the scores of women who are principals of their own firms or partners in well-established large corporations.

Still, the percentages of women in positions of power — whether as tenured professors or established professionals — remain pitifully low. The women-headed firms are mostly very small, and the women partners in large firms are mostly junior. Most women who are deans or directors in schools of architecture occupy positions that have been voided of actual power, while others who have been hired as "fence menders" or "outsiders" are too often considered expendable when the changes they propose meet faculty resistance. Hughes's lament, then, would more accurately have focused not upon the absence of women in architecture, but upon their relative lack of prestige and influence in the profession.

Membership in the "international club of architectural luminaries" is based on stardom, and induction is subject to the approval of the man widely understood to be the nomination committee's only member, Philip Johnson. The acknowledged sponsor of Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Rem Koolhaas, Robert Stern, and Stanley Tigerman, among others, Johnson has ensured that important commissions were directed to his eclectic entourage of favored colleagues, for such projects were crucial to maintaining membership in this unofficial but powerful club. Those inducted reciprocated by guaranteeing that the club remain exclusive, with Johnson the undisputed leader and honorary golem-maker. Johnson has never included a woman among his permanent stable, although Zaha Hadid did enjoy a brief endorsement by her participation in the Museum of Modern Art's 1988 show "Deconstructivist Architecture" (of which Johnson was the de facto curator) and in her subsequent Vitra commission. In recent decades no patron and mentor of Johnson's stature has emerged to provide opportunities for the development of women's talents in architecture, as Phoebe Hearst did for Julia Morgan at the turn of the century. (And Hearst's own patronage, and her conferred commissions, were for institutions devoted to the separate world of women.) Women, when they have shone at all, have been reflecting moons and passing comets rather than steady-burning stars. Perhaps what women architects really want is not stardom, but membership in the club of peers.

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For those female architects who may have longed to orbit around Johnson's star, it is now, of course, too late, since his retirement from active manipulation of the architectural scene will most likely permit the emergence of other paradigms for architectural practice and authorship, which will probably be closer to the practices of filmmakers than to those of the visual artist or fashion designer advocated by "Master Philip and the Boys," as they were called by *Spy* magazine in 1991. Someday the particularly aggressive silencing of women's voices during this period in American architecture, a time when so many women were entering the profession, will be the subject of critical scrutiny. We may learn then how Peter Eisenman could claim to have designed the first postmasculinist skyscraper, and why he and Bernard Tschumi could constitute two-thirds of the chapter on feminist ideologies in architecture in the recent anthology *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*.

In addition to lamenting the limited visibility of women in architecture, Hughes's anthology touches lightly on three critical issues. The first, concerning the simultaneous singularity and multiplicity of women, is rooted in Julia Kristeva's well-known disquisition about "woman/women," an argument that has been further elucidated in Seyla Benhabib's more recent distinction between the generalized "other" and the "specific other." The second issue is the meaning of the feminine, and the third concerns the question of practice, which Hughes claims to represent in its full diversification through her selection of contributors.

The issue of singularity and multiplicity is introduced by way of an image described by Hughes in her introduction: a woman seated before a set of mirrors whose multiple images make her appear to be in rapport with other women around a table. Hughes reads into this image the collective identity forced upon individual women qua "woman" — an identification, as Kristeva has argued, that must be either militantly claimed or else rejected for the sake of preserving the identity of the individual. Indeed, few women architects in the past twenty years have dared to assert their "womanness" for fear that their careers would be endangered and their access to opportunities curtailed. Yet somehow Hughes would like women to attain recognition without further pain, effort, or struggle; she seems puzzled and annoyed that this is not occurring, even if it is now safer to identify as "woman."

To those of us who welcomed the challenge of working for change in the 1970s, feminism was both a powerful theoretical framework for the restructuring of knowledge and a form of activism for the restructuring of society. At that time, many female architects rejected the label "woman architect" because they wanted their talent and ability to be given equal consideration, regardless of gender. Sustained and serious exposure of their work, it was thought, would distinguish the greater talents from the lesser, and allow meritorious individuals to be heard in the discourse about architecture. But access to public forums and prestigious positions was never, in fact, open to all, and most women who gained access did so with the conditional approval of male colleagues, as exceptions who might be considered honorary males, much as the Japanese were once classified as "honorary whites" in apartheid South Africa.

The book's second key issue, the nature of the feminine, is described by contributors Diana Agrest (in "The Return of (the Repressed) Nature") and Catherine Ingraham (in "Losing It in Architecture") as a devalued and subordinated condition. Agrest props up the old nature/culture dichotomy, apparently unaware of anthropologist Sherry Ortner's well-known insights or of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's more recent argument that nature has been transformed into a kind of pet. Agrest's proposal for the China Basin in San

Francisco, which she presents here, resembles the physical pattern of waste water treatment plants, but this ironic precedent is not discussed, suggesting that the project composition, based on tangential circles, is meant to revive (or perhaps mock?) the naive and gender-riddled polemic about curvilinear versus rectilinear designs. Ingraham ponders the relative value of words and images, particularly when words are the production of female architectural philosophers, and her free-ranging argument locates women "on the surface of architecture." By way of Jane Tompkins's analysis of the movie genre of the western (in *West of Everything; The Inner Life of Westerns*), Ingraham surmises that the true macho stance involves rejection of speech and a "desire to attain the solidity and containment of an object," the mastery of which women are presumably unable to achieve. Ingraham argues that the language of the project description, the type of writing common to most offices, struggles "to become the building" but "fails to deliver it." But she fails to mention the traditional role of women critics in building up and disseminating men's architectural production through language, nor does she attempt a critical deconstruction of this role.

Jennifer Bloomer, who has the anthology's last word, defiantly embraces the stereotypical feminine and its inherited connection to speech as an instrument of seduction. In her essay, "Nature Morte," she conjures up believable, if ambiguous, architectures through her sensuous mastery of language. These constructions, made the more pleasurable by their language-specific structure, which is untrammeled by architectural norms and graphic conventions, assert Bloomer's belief that, although words may not be the materials from which buildings are made, they are nonetheless capable of creating "architecture" as a cultural construct.

A serious discussion of practice, seemingly promised by the title, is perhaps the most disappointingly missed opportunity in this anthology. Instead of asking how practice is being redefined, Hughes enumerates the sanctioned "sites" within a broadened field: "education, building, theory, history, urban design, visual and performance arts." Neither the editor nor the contributors problematize the issue further; they seem content to reproduce established forms of practice. They do not, for example, interrogate the common practice of spouses working together without ever acknowledging explicitly the design contributions of each; nor do they explore the conflicts and negotiations that almost always develop when talented and strong-minded individuals collaborate in creative endeavors.

But if none of the contributors has invented a new form of practice, their comments on practice, whether witty, doubtful, or undecided, are revealing. Elizabeth Diller's (and her partner Ricardo Scofidio's) "dissident" shirt pressing is a humorous if cryptic critique of Peter Eisenman's and Greg Lynn's "folded architecture"; Françoise-Hélène Jourda's essay "Aside" includes a frank acknowledgment of the limitations of computer-created geometry as a generatrix for space in the design of a building's exterior envelope; and Margrét Harxardottir's celebration of the open-ended possibilities of unrestrained inquiry and experimentation is brought up against the extreme constraints on form posed by the severe climate of her native Iceland.

We continue to be fascinated by women's voices in architecture because so few have been heard; there is no women's equivalent to publications such as *Conversations with Architects* or *Interviews with Masters of 20th-Century Architecture*. In an era obsessed with defining identity and reclaiming lost history, we have heard the voices of women in every imaginable occupation and profession, with the exception of architecture. For this reason, it would have been enlightening had the contributors discussed candidly the opportunities and difficulties posed by their academic and professional practices. How else will other women know whether their own uncertainties and struggles have a collective resonance in architecture? Too often, women architects internalize failure as an individual rather than endemic problem, becoming unwitting accomplices in their own marginalization.

Hughes's image of the mirrored woman, with its reference to Kristeva's argument about "woman/women," could also suggest the self-constructed prison of narcissistic discourse, which exempts the gazer from external scrutiny. Such scrutiny has been postponed for decades by the continuing presentation of the work of women as a special category. Hughes has allowed the essays here to remain enclosed within this circular discourse, with no external questioning or probing. I do not look forward to another round of uncritical presentation, to yet another reproductive cycle of self-deception or invective about discrimination by design. But nor do I expect a further iteration of these same tired themes in the decades to come. A populous generation of women with high expectations of themselves in architecture will soon come into their own; the older systems of exclusion are much weakened, even as new ones are put in place. I do look forward, then, to an unabashed, across-the-board discussion of the full range of theoretical and practical issues, not just of those that continue to be structured by the current range of appropriateness.

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